

## Writing the Shadow: War and Childhood in Marguerite Duras's 'Cahiers de la guerre'

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### Abstract

Marguerite Duras's *Cahiers de la guerre* (*Wartime Notebooks*) were written between 1943 and 1949 and first published in France in 2006. Two key aspects of Duras's writing which appear for the first time in these notebooks are her pre-occupation with her childhood in Indochina, on the one hand, and her experiences during the Second World War and the occupation of France, on the other hand. This essay explores the dual representation of war and childhood in *Cahiers de la guerre*, in terms of the relationship between identity and alterity that underpins both narratives. Drawing on the work of the psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin, the author contends that Duras's construction of this relationship, initially founded on an exclusive and oppositional model of identification, is gradually transformed into intersubjective recognition. It is argued that this transition is possible precisely because of Duras's process of integration of her own inner 'otherness' and thus her ability to 'write the shadow', both individually and collectively.

**Keywords:** Second World War, colonialism, identity, autobiography, psychology

### 1. Introduction

In October 2006, more than ten years after the death of Marguerite Duras, four handwritten notebooks, entitled *Cahiers de la guerre* (*Wartime Notebooks*) by Duras herself, were published for the first time in their integral original version. The title of these notebooks, which were composed between 1943 and 1949, is perhaps somewhat misleading. For instead of a series of diary entries relating to the Second World War, as one might expect, they contain a seemingly incongruous mixture of semi-autobiographical accounts of key episodes from the author's childhood and adolescence in Indochina, on the one hand, and of her experiences during the Occupation, on the other hand. This dual narrative structure produces a typically Durassian mirror effect, as the collective trauma of the war triggers buried memories of certain traumatic events associated with Duras's own childhood. As Claire Cerasi has pointed out, in Duras's work as a whole the personal is always part of the collective. Exemplified in the 1985 text *La Douleur* (*The War: a memoir*), a revised version of parts of the second and third notebook, Duras's writing itself is an expression of the author's need to break down the barriers between what Cerasi calls 'individual distress and historical disaster' ('la détresse individuelle et le désastre historique') (Cerasi, 1993, p. 8) (Note 1). But whereas in previous works, particularly in *La Douleur* and in *L'Amant* (*The Lover*) (1984), the parallel between war and childhood remains largely implicit and marginal, in the wartime notebooks it becomes central to the text's narrative and thematic framework, where the scenes describing Duras's relationship with her family and the colonial environment of Indochina in the late 1920s alternate with her accounts of the Occupation and the period following the Liberation in August 1944.

If Duras was haunted by her experience of the Second World War, which occupies a central position in her work from the mid-1980s until her last texts of the early 1990s, the same is true of her childhood and adolescence. Indeed, in the penultimate section of *cahiers de la guerre*, entitled *L'Enfance illimitée* (*An unlimited childhood*), she describes her early years in Indochina as a shadow that followed her throughout much of her life: 'This is the period of my life which feels the most arid, apart from a few years embedded in it, like an altar of repose, from which I drew strength for the rest of my life. My childhood bothers me, nonetheless, and follows my life like a shadow.' ('C'est la période de ma vie que je sens la plus aride, à part quelques années qui sont en elle, comme un reposoir, où j'ai puisé des forces pour toute ma vie [...] Cette enfance me tracasse, pourtant, et suit ma vie comme une ombre' (Duras, 2006, p. 359). One key element of Duras's traumatic childhood experience is her

relationship with her elder brother Pierre, the prototype for the ambiguous male figure whose mixture of sadistic cruelty and seductiveness pervades much of her subsequent work. Whilst the origins of the brother's violence are never clearly elucidated, in *L'Enfance illimitée* Duras suggests that they may have coincided with a sudden and painful moment of separation between Pierre and his two siblings:

'Then, one day, all of a sudden, one of us, our elder brother Pierre, was a stranger to us [...] The similarities between our lives, which had prevailed until then, soon vanished and gave way to an appalling separatism which infiltrated our most innocent childhood games.' ('Puis, un jour, et d'un coup, l'un de nous, notre aîné, Pierre, nous fut étranger [...] L'indistinction de nos vies qui jusque-là avait régné s'évanouit bientôt et fit place à un séparatisme épouvantable qui s'infiltra jusqu'à nos moindres jeux.') (Duras, 2006, p. 364). Following the death of Duras's father in 1921, Pierre takes up a position of absolute dominance within the family, controlling his younger brother and sister with his unrelenting physical and psychological violence. The frightening separatism to which Duras alludes here and the violence it generates within the microcosm of the family, is later reflected in the collective violence of the Second World War, as Duras suggests in her autobiographical novel *L'Amant (The Lover)* (1984) where she writes: 'I see the war in the same colours as my childhood. I get the time of the war confused with my older brother's rule.' (Je vois la guerre sous les mêmes couleurs que mon enfance. Je confonds le temps de la guerre avec le règne de mon frère aîné.) (Duras, 1984, p. 78).

## 2. Theoretical Perspective

From a psychoanalytic point of view, the destructive separateness evoked by Duras both in personal and in historical terms, may be seen as the inevitable consequence of an exclusive and potentially antagonistic definition of identity and alterity. If, as Jessica Benjamin has shown, the self is constructed as having a clearly delimited unified identity, the other is necessarily perceived as the excluded, and hence feared and disowned, counterpart of that self. According to Benjamin 'the self may be invested in depositing its repudiated aspects in the other, using it to represent what is despised or intolerable – for instance, weakness or aggression – and so necessarily casts the other in the role of opposite' (Benjamin, 1998, p. 86). However, Benjamin makes a crucial distinction between the 'abstract' or 'fantasy other' and the 'concrete other', arguing that 'the abstract other' is merely a mental projection, created by the self which, in an attempt to protect itself from its own unwanted aspects, displaces the latter on to others, either individuals or groups (Benjamin 1998, p. 87). In order to break down such dichotomous constructions of identity and alterity, the self needs to accept and integrate its own 'shadow' by identifying with all the different positions it can potentially occupy. In this way, 'the abstract other', who is merely a fantasised extension of the self, becomes 'the concrete other', a real person or persons who exist outside and independently of the self. Drawing on Benjamin's work, it is my intention in this essay to examine Duras's engagement with different models of identity in *Cahiers de la guerre*, tracing a transition in these texts from an initial inscription of binary patterns of interaction to a more flexible and reciprocal mode of relating which corresponds to Benjamin's concept of intersubjective recognition (Benjamin, 1998, p. 43). The essay aims to show how this transition is achieved through Duras's paradoxical identification with her own 'otherness'.

## 3. Gender and Violence in the Family

In her first notebook which revolves around the author's memories of her adolescence, the oppositional model of relationships is encapsulated in the descriptions of the young Duras as a victim of her elder brother's extreme physical and verbal abuse. Although readers of other works by Duras are already familiar with this staging of the violence between brother and sister in *L'Amant (The Lover)* (1984) and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord (The North China Lover)* (1992), in *Cahiers de la guerre* the description of the young girl's terror, as she becomes the object of her brother's murderous rage and savage beatings, is much more explicit and disturbing than in her later works: 'Every time there came a moment when I thought that my brother was going to kill me and when I no longer felt angry, but afraid that my head might become detached from my body and roll around the floor, or that I might become permanently insane as a result.' ('Chaque fois, il arrivait un moment où je croyais que mon frère allait me tuer et où je n'éprouvais plus de colère, mais la peur que ma tête se détache de mon corps et aille rouler par terre, ou aussi d'en rester folle.') (Duras, 2006, p. 48). If, in *Cahiers de la guerre*, Duras projects the full impact of this primal sado-masochistic scenario, it is possible that through her successive autobiographical and fictional revisions of the original experience, she was able to gradually transcend and transform the traumatic memories associated with it. This transformation is possible because, in the *cahiers*, Duras already inscribes the brother's violence within the social and sexual hierarchies that shaped his experience. His aggression may thus be understood as the physical and psychological manifestation of this social environment rather than as some inherently 'evil' essence. In terms of the dominant model of dichotomous gender identifications, it is because he occupies the active 'masculine' subject position, associated with power, physical strength and aggression, that his younger sister is placed in the opposite position, that of the passive 'feminine' object. The latter then

becomes the target of the subject's violence, precisely because 'the feminine' is the feared and thus hated counterpart of 'the masculine' in traditional patriarchal cultures. The feminine 'other', in this sense, is the projection of the repudiated aspects of the masculine 'self', since, as Jessica Benjamin has put it, 'a repressed feminine passivity lodges behind the male's obsessional use of defensive, aggressive activity' (Benjamin, 1998, p. 32). In this context, it is interesting to note the sexual overtones of the brother's violence towards his sister, as his physical brutality is invariably accompanied by a misogynistic litany of insults (Duras, 2006, pp. 47-48).

However, although Duras's representation of the brother/sister relationship mirrors the split, polarised model of masculine and feminine positions, the latter are less fixed than an initial reading of the text might suggest. For the position of the aggressor in relation to Duras as the victim is occupied not only by her brother, but also by her mother whose abusive behaviour alternates with and reflects that of her eldest son. Although the destructive aspect of the mother is perhaps less pronounced here than in, for example, *L'Amant*, Duras's evocation of this figure in *Cahiers* is highly ambivalent, as suggested in the striking description of her hands as resembling both the protective hands of God and the potential instruments of physical violence: 'Later she beat me with the same hands.' ('Avec ces mêmes mains, plus tard, elle me battait') (Duras, 2006, p. 62). This representation of the mother as occupying both the position of the 'feminine' nurturer and the 'masculine' aggressor clearly demonstrates the fluidity and ultimately the interchangeability of all subject positions within the prevalent binary patterns of relationships. The complexity and ambivalence of Duras's writing in this respect is evident in *Cahiers de la guerre*, as the ostensibly fixed and mutually exclusive identities of male and female, victim and aggressor, sadist and masochist are progressively destabilised. Ultimately, Duras transcends this dualistic framework by occupying both positions within each pair of opposites and thus initiates a process of constructing what Benjamin has called 'shifting, conflicting identifications' (Benjamin, 1998, p. 37).

#### 4. Constructions of the Colonial 'Other'

The reversal of opposites is highlighted in the first wartime notebook where Duras's adolescent self is described both as the victim of violence and as the perpetrator of verbal and psychological abuse directed against Léo, a wealthy Vietnamese man whose love for the young Marguerite is ruthlessly exploited by the latter's relatively impecunious family. Using Marguerite as a go-between, they extract vast sums of money from him and use him to pay off their debts, while their hateful and contemptuous attitude towards him clearly reflects the racist social hierarchy and ideology of colonial Indochina: 'Among the French people in the colony, annamitophobia was law.' ('Parmi les Français de la colonie, l'annamitophobie faisait loi.') (Duras, 2006, p. 44). In a cruel game of deception, Duras and her family nurture Léo's vain hope that perhaps one day he will be the young woman's lover, for as the mother points out on several occasions, sexual relationships between colonisers and colonised are strictly taboo: 'My mother made me swear [...] that I'd never give myself to Léo.' ('Ma mère me faisait jurer [...] que je ne me donnerais jamais à Léo.') (Duras, 2006, p. 58). And although Duras does eventually yield to Léo's pleas, she reluctantly sleeps with him only once (Duras, 2006, p. 65). That she herself assimilates the dominant colonial ideology with its system of races and classes is evident in numerous disparaging remarks about Léo whose ethnicity is seen as an obstacle to her enjoyment of his luxurious limousine: 'Sadly, Léo was Vietnamese, despite his marvellous car.' ('Malheureusement, Léo était annamite, malgré sa merveilleuse auto.') (Duras, 2006, p. 42). This constellation of class and ethnicity shows the instability and fluidity of subject positions at a collective level. For although Duras's family, due to their relative poverty, find themselves marginalised and disempowered by their white colonial *milieu*, their very 'whiteness' puts them in a position of power in relation to Léo.

This 'reversible complementarity', to use Benjamin's term, is also staged at an individual level, as the narrative inscribes a certain parallel between the young Duras's suffering at the hands of her brother and her own abusive behaviour towards Léo. In several lengthy and detailed descriptions of her relationship with the Vietnamese man, Duras transfers her own victim status on to Léo, as misogyny and racism, the sexual and the colonial 'other' merge into the object position within a reversible subject/object paradigm. If Duras had internalised her brother's violence in the form of guilt and self-hatred, as the *cahiers de la guerre* suggest (Duras, 2006, p. 51), her later identification with her aggressor impels her to project these unwanted aspects of her own self on to Léo who has already been cast in the role of the other, precisely because he is Vietnamese. A particularly disturbing example of this shift in positions is the lengthy scene describing Léo's kiss which fills the young woman with disgust. Although this reaction seems understandable at first, when Duras describes her feeling of having been violated by the kiss (Duras, 2006, p. 86), the obsessively reiterated expression of her sense of revulsion in relation to Léo points to the fact that he has, indeed, become the feared and despised 'other' whose kiss is experienced as a kind of invasion of the white woman's identity: 'I thought that the mouth, the saliva and the tongue of this despicable being had touched my lips [...] All the time I thought that a small particle of Léo's saliva had stayed in my mouth,

and I spat it out again and again [...] I imagined that my saliva had become mixed up with Léo's forever.' ('Je pensais que la bouche, la salive, la langue de cet être méprisable avaient touché mes lèvres [...] je croyais toujours qu'il me restait une parcelle de la salive de Léo dans la bouche et je recrachais et recrachais sans cesse [...] je m'imaginai que ma salive était à jamais mélangée à celle de Léo'.) (Duras, 2006, pp. 86-88). The images deployed here, with their connotations of invasion and contamination by the 'other', recall Kristeva's notion of 'the abject' as 'that which is expelled from the self as the repudiated not-part-of-self' (Benjamin, 1998, p. 89). In *cahiers de la guerre* Léo's saliva comes to represent this abjected 'not-self' which the young Duras so desperately wants to expel from her body, as the potential fusion of self and other seems too threatening in view of the racist laws that govern her experience in Indochina. Indeed, as Catherine Bouthors-Paillart has pointed out, Duras's accounts of her childhood reflect the phobic defense of racial boundaries characteristic of colonial ideologies (Bouthors-Paillart, 2002, p. 4).

It is worth drawing attention at this point to the striking difference between Duras's derogatory depiction of Léo, described in *cahiers de la guerre* as 'definitely uglier than the average Vietnamese'

('nettement plus laid que l'Annamite moyen') (Duras, 2006, p. 59), and the glamorous figure of the tall, elegant and alluring lover from North China in *L'Amant (The Lover)* (1984) and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord (The North China Lover)* (1992). Although the story of the eponymous Chinese lover has been understood by readers and critics as a semi-autobiographical narrative, based on a real episode from Duras's adolescence, the fact that this figure does not appear anywhere in the *cahiers de la guerre*, the earliest published account of this period of her life, suggests that 'the lover' is a fictional construct, based partly on a reworking of the figure of 'Léo'. This strange metamorphosis may well have functioned as a reaction to and retrospective compensation for the collective and individual 'annamitophobia' discernible in Duras's portrayal of her relationship with Léo in *cahiers de la guerre*. This interpretation is shared by Eva Ahlstedt who points out that Duras's fear of racist taboos was probably an important factor in the transformation of the Vietnamese into the 'Chinese' lover (Ahlstedt, 2003, p. 87).

However, it is important to remember that Duras wrote the wartime notebooks in Paris nearly thirteen years after the events she describes here and that this temporal and spatial distance enabled her to rewrite herself from the position of the author/narrator who is conscious retrospectively of her own collusion with the colonial environment in which she grew up. Her reconstruction of the relationship between Léo and her own adolescent self is thus informed by an awareness that injects a certain irony into the narrative. This growing self-consciousness, perceptible throughout *cahiers de la guerre*, is clearly evident in various textual examples of split identification, where the first-person narrative is transposed into a fictional character. Thus, the first notebook includes various drafts of the novel *Un barrage contre le Pacifique (The Sea Wall)* (1950), in which the narrative 'I' becomes the figure of Suzanne. This oscillation in *cahiers de la guerre* between first and third-person narration, corresponding to the underlying internal split between self and other, enables Duras to dramatise her own contradictions, her sense of alienation and of being an outsider in the white colonial community. This is particularly striking in a scene representing the young Duras going to the cinema in Saigon, where she is ashamed of having to sit in one of the cheap front seats, reserved for the Vietnamese spectators (Duras, 2006, p. 96). Unable to identify with either the colonisers, due to her poverty, or the colonised, due to her French origins, Duras is alienated from both groups, the radical outsider who is, paradoxically, both self and other. Because of this ambiguous position, the very structure of the mutually exclusive self/other paradigm breaks down at this point in *cahiers de la guerre*. As the self becomes other, the narrative 'I' merges almost imperceptibly into an imaginary third-person projection, when Duras watches herself walking through the auditorium (Duras, 2006, pp. 96-97).

## 5. Wartime Narratives: Integrating the Shadow

### 5.1 Shifting Identifications

The narrative pattern of split identifications continues throughout the remainder of the *cahiers de la guerre*, where draft episodes of *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* alternate with two war narratives, untitled in *cahiers*, but recognisable as 'Ter le milicien' ('Ter the Militiaman) and 'Albert des Capitales' (Note 2), both published, with some major alterations and omissions, in *La Douleur (The War: a memoir)* (1985). In his biography of Duras, Jean Vallier has argued that there is little, if any, evidence that the interrogation and torture of a Gestapo informant, described in 'Albert des Capitales' and its narrative prototype in *cahiers de la guerre*, correspond to any real events assumed to have taken place towards the end of the Occupation (Vallier, 2006, p. 653). Vallier's interview with Georges Beauchamp, one of Duras's closest friends during the War and fellow member of the Resistance, seems to corroborate this view (Vallier, 2006, p. 655). That this episode is largely, or perhaps even

exclusively, a fictional construct may also be implicit in the different names Duras chose for the story's principal female figure who is called Théodora in *Cahiers* and Thérèse in *La Douleur*. If this is the case, the narratives in question could be read as an expression of Duras's own emotional ambivalence and crossing of positions, as she projects herself into the figure of Théodora/Thérèse. Her statement in the preamble to 'Albert des Capitales' that 'I am Thérèse' ('Thérèse c'est moi') might then allude to this imaginary identification rather than to any real events (Duras, 1985, p. 134). But although this scene itself may be a fictional creation, the figure of Théodora who reappears in later narratives in *cahiers de la guerre* (Duras 2006, pp. 163-174, p. 228) as well as in *Outside* (Duras 1981, pp. 293-295) and in *Yann Andréa Steiner* (Duras 1992, pp. 24-42) seems to have been inspired by Duras's neighbour and friend Thédora Kats, a Jewish woman whose disabled daughter was murdered by the Nazis at Ravensbrück concentration camp (Mascolo, 1987, p. 72). In the interrogation scene described in *cahiers de la guerre*, however, it is clear that Duras's own experience during the Occupation, as she waits for her husband's return from the concentration camp, is conflated with that of Théodora: 'Théodora's husband had been arrested by the Gestapo, she didn't know if he was still alive, she was distraught, she was going to be the one to deal with the Gestapo agent.' ('Le mari de Théodora avait été arrêté par la Gestapo, elle ne savait pas s'il était encore vivant, elle en avait gros sur le coeur, c'était elle qui devait s'occuper de l'agent de la Gestapo.') (Duras, 2006, p. 116). In this merging of identities, experiences and narratives, Duras as Théodora projects herself into the collective suffering of the victims of the Second World War, while expressing her own personal anguish and rage.

However, as the interrogation scene gathers momentum, the identities of its actors become increasingly blurred, as the positions of victim and assailant are once again reversed. On the one hand, the constant switch in the narrative focus from the interrogation itself to an imaginary scene where the informant denounces people to the Gestapo, his actions leading directly to torture and mass murder, might explain the level of violence used to interrogate the man. On the other hand, however, Duras shows the gradual dehumanisation of Théodora, and thus herself in the guise of her fictional double, when she describes how she becomes desensitised by her own violence and how her perception of the man as inhuman justifies her desire to kill him: 'This is not a man like the others. We can kill him.' ('Ce n'est pas un homme comme les autres. On peut le tuer.') (Duras, 2006, p. 124). At the same time, the Gestapo agent mirrors his former victims, as their fear and pain now merge with his own. As the Resistance fighters kick the man into a state of semi-consciousness, the constant repetition of the nouns 'blows' and 'insults' ('les coups' and 'les injures' (Duras, 2006, p. 125) is reminiscent of earlier scenes in *cahiers de la guerre* where Duras describes herself as the victim of her brother's brutality. This suggests that, throughout this war narrative, the position of Duras/Théodora as torturer is a collective enactment of Duras's personal feelings of violence towards her brother. The interrogation scene itself, then, is an imaginary act of revenge, as the figure of the brother merges with that of the Gestapo agent. This parallel between war and childhood is made explicit towards the end of this episode, when 'Théodora' clearly becomes Duras: 'When she [Théodora] was little she had taken a lot of beatings, she had never been able to hit back, she dreamt about hitting her older brother.' ('Quand elle [Théodora] était petite elle avait reçu beaucoup de coups, elle n'avait jamais pu les rendre, elle rêvait qu'elle frappait son frère aîné.') (Duras, 2006, p. 131). The reversal of the subject/object positions in this scene includes a corresponding shift in relation to the oppositions between active and passive and between masculine and feminine. In this sense Duras/Théodora, by identifying with the position of the aggressor, takes up the 'masculine' subject position and relegates the Gestapo agent to the passive 'feminine' position in an imaginary reversal of the original brother/sister dyad. Thus, the tortured man's vulnerability implies his increasing feminisation, when he is described as crying 'like a woman': 'He's blubbing [...] She blubbered as well [...] But that's because she's a woman.' ('Il chiale [...] Elle aussi a chialé [...] Mais c'est parce que c'est une femme.') (Duras, 2006, p. 125). But although the pattern of reversible complementarity is clearly evident in the interrogation scene, Duras ultimately transcends its oppositional structure by creating composite identities for both herself as Théodora and for the figures of the Gestapo man and her brother. Thus, ultimately, the victim and the torturer are configured as aspects of the same person, when, towards the end of this scene, Duras/Théodora reflects on her own capacity for violence: 'I'm nasty, I've always thought as much.' ('Je suis méchante, depuis toujours je m'en doutais.') As Claire Cerasi has pointed out, Duras refuses to divide humanity into good and evil, just as she transcends the fundamental opposition between self and other (Cerasi, 1993, p. 72).

### 5.2 From the 'Abstract' to the 'Concrete' Other

In *Cahiers de la guerre* this recognition and integration of the violent other as part of the self signals an initial move away from the oppositional paradigm of relationships and reaches towards Benjamin's notion of an inclusive subjectivity, for, as Benjamin has put it: 'only inclusion, the reavowal of what was disavowed, in short

owning, could allow that otherness a place outside the self in the realm of externality, could grant it recognition separate from the self' (Benjamin, 1998, p. 103). In *Cahiers de la guerre* the initial construction of the 'abstract other' as a mere projection of parts of the self, is gradually transformed into 'the concrete other', when Duras represents her own complexities by positioning herself on both sides of the binary divide. The interrogation scene in the first notebook thus conflates all the polarised subject positions inscribed in earlier sections of this text, as Théodora/Duras incorporates aspects of the figure of the brother, the mother and the middle-aged 'donneur' himself, since they have all been both victims and aggressors. This ability to be both self and other points to the narrative inscription in *cahiers* of what Benjamin has described as 'a self that allows different voices, asymmetry and contradiction, that holds ambivalence' (Benjamin, 1998, p. 101). Similar examples of Duras's ambivalent self-construction can be traced through the war narratives in *cahiers de la guerre*, where a desire for revenge alternates with her constant awareness of her own potential for violence.

In this context it is worth drawing attention to a passage in the *cahiers* (Duras, 2006, p. 195), later rewritten in *La Douleur* (Duras, 1985, pp. 31-32), where Duras describes the sense of outrage felt by a group of French women when they meet a priest who has recently returned from a POW camp in Germany, in the company of an orphaned German boy. It is clear at this point that Duras sympathises with the women's hatred towards both the child and the smiling priest whose Christian sense of forgiveness, so soon after the war, is perceived as a scandalously pious expression of indifference towards its victims: 'The women looked away, they spat on the radiant smile of clemency and clarity. They ignored the child. Everything became divided. On one side was the women's front, compact and irreducible. On the other side this solitary man who was right in a language that the women no longer understood.' ('Les femmes détournèrent leurs regards, elles crachaient sur le sourire épanoui de clémence et de clarté. Ignorèrent l'enfant. Tout se divisait. Restait d'un côté le front des femmes, compact, irréductible. Et de l'autre côté cet homme seul qui avait raison dans un langage que les femmes ne comprenaient plus.') (Duras, 1985, p. 32). Although, as Rosemary Scullion has argued, this episode demonstrates 'the intensity of irrational feeling' experienced by the women (Scullion, 1990, p. 37), for Duras the recognition and expression of these feelings may also represent a further step towards accepting her own hatred and thus her capacity for violence.

The importance of such an awareness of the potentially destructive other within the self is also emphasised in the collection of essays entitled *Outside*, where Duras contends that everyone, including herself, is a potential aggressor, but that her knowledge of her own inner shadow prevents her from actually committing acts of violence: 'The difference between the Nazis, the Stalinists and myself is that they don't know that they have the potential to commit crimes and that I know this about myself. The difference [...] is between those who see and those who don't see that the whole world is in each of the individuals who are part of it and that each of these individuals [...] is a potential criminal.' ('La différence entre les nazis, les staliniens, et moi, c'est qu'eux ne savent pas être porteurs de crime et que moi je le sais de moi. La différence [...] est entre ceux qui voient et ceux qui ne voient pas que le monde entier est en chacun des hommes qui le composent et que chacun de ces hommes [...] est un criminel virtuel') (Duras, 1981, p. 284). In this context, Colin Davis has argued that in Duras the notion of the indivisible nature of humanity, central also to Robert Antelme's *L'Espèce humaine* (*The Human Race*) (1947), implies that there is ultimately no difference between victims and perpetrators (Davis, 1997, pp. 176). Although some of Duras's statements may lend themselves to this interpretation, she does suggest that it is precisely the refusal to become conscious of and to take responsibility for one's own destructiveness that perpetuates individual and collective violence, since the unacknowledged shadow within is transposed on to external others who then become the victims of its projected violence. Thus, for Duras, as for Robert Antelme and Dionys Mascolo, collective responsibility was a prerequisite for the ideal of universal freedom and equality (Duras 1985, p. 61). In this sense, the *Cahiers de la guerre* may be seen as an early expression of Duras's political commitment to a communist ethics that would be based on an intersubjective rather than an oppositional and exclusive model of relationships.

## 6. Conclusion

In *Cahiers de la guerre* Duras's narrative self-construction reaches across a range of subject positions, both male and female, powerful and vulnerable, as she identifies with the figure of the mother, the brother, Théodora and even, to some extent, the anonymous Gestapo agent. By juxtaposing her childhood narratives with her accounts of the Second World War and the Occupation, Duras shows how both episodes in her life are underpinned by a mutually exclusive paradigm of relating and how, in this context, physical violence becomes an extreme expression of the need to dominate others, as long as they are perceived as mere reflections cast by the shadow of the self. Oscillating between the giving and the receiving end of this polarity, Duras describes herself, either alternately or simultaneously, as victim and torturer, capable of both compassion and cruelty. By tolerating and

consciously embracing her own internal contradictions, she is able to accept the same ambiguities in others and thus to adopt what Benjamin has defined as 'the intersubjective view' which sees 'the other as more than the self's objects' (Benjamin, 1998, p. 79). In *cahiers de la guerre*, Duras moves from the oppositional model, foregrounded in her stories about childhood and adolescence, to the intersubjective view that emerges from the war narratives and thus integrates, through her writing, what Kristeva has called 'the stranger within' (Kristeva, 1991, p. 182).

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### Notes

Note 1. All quotations in French have been translated by the author.

Note 2. 'Albert des Capitales' was a waiter who worked in the café 'Les Capitales' in Paris.

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